

BEYOND ANNE FRANK

HIDDEN CHILDREN AND POSTWAR FAMILIES IN HOLLAND



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DIANE L. WOLF

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Introduction

I don't remember my mother. She was about 28. And one day she went walking in the street in Amsterdam, with my aunt, in 1942. Everybody said to her—and to them—"Don't walk in the street, because it's dangerous for Jewish people to walk in the street." And she said, "Well, then I'll dye my hair red instead of black." So she did! But they were picked up by the Nazis, both of them. And we never saw them again.

Thus began my first interview for this project, with Max L., in Amsterdam. The only child born to a middle-class nonobservant Jewish family in 1936, he has no recollection of his mother, who was deported to a concentration camp when he was 6 years old. (See figure 1.) After that, he was shuffled between various households—his uncle's, his grandparents', some family friends'—and even placed in an orphanage, a setting that frightened him. He remembers all these settings but not his mother; he has clearly repressed all memory of her. Sometime in 1942, when it was no longer safe for Jews to be in Holland, Max's grandfather re-

trieved him from the orphanage and took him by train to Friesland. At the train station at Leeuwarden, he gave Max to a stranger who was waiting for them. *My grandfather said to me, "You have to go with that gentleman, and he'll take care of you." My grandfather popped in the train, and he was gone. And . . . then you can feel your heart pounding. "What's going to happen to me?" and . . . well, the man, he took me by the hand and, he was talking to me, but I couldn't understand him because he spoke Frisian, not Dutch. When I came into his house, my foster mother, she came toward me, and she hugged me, and she said things like, "Oh, my poor child! You must be cold, because you don't have woolen stockings! Well, I will see to it that you get everything you need and . . ." Well, she was very kind.*

Max was welcomed into the man's family, which consisted of his very maternal wife and one other foster child; the couple could not have children of their own. (See figure 2.) As Max adapted to village life in Friesland, he learned the language, excelled in school, and grew to love his foster parents, as they did him. Max knew he was different—he was a dark-haired boy among blonds—and he knew his name was not Frisian, since people often commented that Max was a dog's name, not a person's. But he did not know he was Jewish. He played constantly with his friends, and like most village boys, accompanied his family to church on Sundays.

After the war, in 1945, someone began to visit occasionally whom Max described as a *dikke vette man* (a fat man; *dikke* and *vette* both mean "fat") and whom his foster parents referred to as his *vader* (father). He had no idea who this man was or what the term *vader* meant. Max himself used Frisian terms—*Mem* and *Heit*—to address his foster mother and father, who he believed were his real parents. He did not interact with the man, nor did the man talk with him.

His father paid these visits because he wanted Max back. His foster parents wanted to keep him. A great deal of correspondence flew back and forth, and Max's foster parents bought some time by convincing his father that it was not appropriate for him to take Max until he could provide him with a mother. Consequently, Max's father married a non-Jewish woman whom Max was to call "Tante Jo" (Aunt Jo, pronounced Yo). When they came to visit, Max paid no attention to them. When they

tried to take him home with them to Amsterdam, he ran away, screaming and crying. They left without him. In 1948, when Max was 12, his foster father finally took him by train to Amsterdam; they met his father and stepmother at a train station, where Max was turned over. Tante Jo took one look at Max, his homespun country haircut and clothes, and laughed at him, causing immediate humiliation, a feeling that she inflicted on Max for years to come. He went home with them but immediately ran away to Friesland, something he continued to do his first year home. After that, Max stayed with his foster parents every summer during school vacation.

The separation from his “parents” and home in Friesland caused Max considerable stress and trauma—he began to wet his bed and started to lose some hair. He describes himself as being a timid, shy, and nervous child; he could never disagree or say no. Like most hidden children, he had realized that being agreeable was a key strategy in adapting to a foster family. At home in Amsterdam, he was withdrawn and rarely talked, a sharp contrast to his behavior when he lived in rural Friesland. He always thought of Friesland as home, as a refuge from his father and stepmother. It is also likely that the early trauma of losing his mother was replayed during this round of separation from foster parents to whom he was attached. Indeed, that early loss may have intensified his attempt to hold on to the only parents he knew.

When Max first arrived, his father and stepmother made an initial and short-lived attempt to be nice to him. Yet relations quickly soured, first between his father and stepmother and then between Max and both his parents. His father constantly lectured him about his schoolwork, his grades, his bed-wetting, and many other things. His stepmother insisted on being called “Mommy” instead of “Tante Jo” and began to punish him, often with beatings. *I had to call her “Mommy” after some months, and by that time, I hated her guts already. She started spanking me and slapping me, whenever I did something she didn’t like, whatever I had done. When I wet my bed, I got punished.* Because Max’s father was away on business most weeknights, his stepmother was the primary parent. Max found her to be kind and gentle at times and at others ferociously cruel.

Max was confused by his multiple parents and continued to distinguish between his biological father and his “real parents” in Friesland.

What I thought in those years was, "There's always for me a possibility to escape. To escape from my stepmother, to escape from my father. . . . And my real home is there, in Friesland. This Amsterdam is a temporary situation." When I ran away and came to Friesland, I was overwhelmed with a warm blanket of love and remembrance. I remember everything; every stone of the building in the house we lived in. Every stone in the cobblestone street I lived on. I saw my friends; I got seven or eight friends.

When he was around 13, one afternoon when his stepmother was out Max received a phone call from a Mr. Polak from the Joodse Gemeente (Jewish Community). Max's parents had been members of the Orthodox synagogue before the war; the man must have known about Max from records there or from the government's postwar organization. He asked if Max was going to have a bar mitzvah. Max, who knew nothing about Judaism, asked where he could get one. The caller realized that Max was ignorant about his Jewish background, and they made a date to meet, on an afternoon when Max's stepmother would be out. It was during that pivotal meeting that Max learned he was Jewish, that he had a Jewish mother who was dead, and that his stepmother was not his mother at all. That evening, he blew up at his stepmother, crying and yelling that she was not his mother. During this part of our interview, Max sobbed as he tried to tell the story. After he had stopped yelling at his stepmother, they talked, and she explained that his father had thought it best not to speak about his deceased mother. Through this dialogue, they seemed to reach a better understanding, and she even hugged and kissed him goodnight, "like a real mother."

But that improvement was not to last. When Max was 14, his stepmother punished him for altering his report card by throwing him through a glass door. Neighbors took him to the doctor to be stitched up. His stepmother apologized that evening. Later that night she invited him into her bed and forced him to touch her breasts and vagina. Thus began a four-year sexual relationship in which this kind of forced contact almost always followed beatings.

Max left home for the army at age 18 and later married and had two children. He always felt that his foster parents, the ones who had hidden him during the war, were his true parents and family. They had equally

strong feelings for him, and it was no surprise when they left Max and their other foster son their property, money, and belongings.

Max's story, unfortunately not unique in its brutality, illuminates the focus of this book—the complexity of hidden children's experiences as they took on and confronted multiple parents, multiple families, and multiple identities, all the while dealing with emotional connections and separations. His story also demonstrates why it was only after the war that his troubles began.

At the age of 40, Max had a life-changing experience. His business failed, and as part of an application for financial help from the state to Holocaust victims, he received state-provided therapy. Although he did not qualify for financial help, therapy proved to be liberating when, for the first time, he talked about the incest imposed by his stepmother and realized that he had been victimized: *I am a victim. Not of the war, but . . . of what happened after the war. I am a postwar Holocaust victim.*

Max began to socialize with Jewish friends and to take part in Jewish social activities. He was asked to serve as an administrator for some Jewish clubs. Through these leadership roles, he began to feel that he wasn't a worthless person after all. Although Max identifies as Jewish, he is clearly more at home in a church than in a synagogue, where he doesn't recognize any of the songs.

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This book is based on interviews with almost seventy people who, like Max, were hidden as children in Holland during World War II.¹ With a focus on family configurations and relationships, these histories demonstrate that we can only understand the effects of the Shoah by examining wartime and especially *postwar* contexts. Max's complicated family history alone defies facile sociological categorization. Max had three mothers and two fathers and lived in three different families before the age of twelve. He has repressed all memories of his biological mother; his foster mother was loving, and his stepmother was abusive; he loved his foster father and felt completely detached from his biological father. His sense of family derives from his life with his foster parents during and after the war. At the age of 6 Max had connected to them, and it was in their home

that he experienced unconditional love and acceptance. It is, of course, highly likely that Max had experienced unconditional love from and attachment to his biological mother, but he has no memories of that. Indeed, that he was able to connect to his foster parents when he was 6 suggests that he had experienced a strong attachment earlier in life.

Max experienced firsthand the ramifications of the Nazi Occupation after his mother was deported, when he was shuffled from house to house and then placed in an orphanage. And in 1948, three years after the war's official end, he experienced the full ramifications of the Occupation and the war when his father forced him to come "home" to Amsterdam. The symptoms he describes—bed-wetting and hair loss—all point to the trauma of separation. In his Amsterdam home, he not only felt abandoned but was physically and sexually abused. While these violations were not common among hidden children after the war, they did occur with stepparents in a few instances.

Scholarship and popular literature about the Holocaust tend to focus on the systematic annihilation of European Jewry through deportation to concentration camps.² In light of the devastation suffered by the European Jewish population, such attention is clearly warranted. Because so few couples and families survived concentration camps intact, the theme of family loss rather than family life is prevalent.³

This book contributes a different perspective to that literature—that of family dynamics before, during, and especially after World War II as experienced by Jewish hidden children.⁴ It also highlights a history that is not only different from, but often diametrically opposed to, that experienced by most European Jewry. For Jews who remained in Europe during the war, 1945 meant liberation from Nazi oppression, marking an end to the worst years of their lives. For many hidden children, however, the war years were passable, ranging from a marginal to a rather pleasant existence, depending on the hiding family. But an unexpected finding of this research was that for many hidden children, if not for most, the year 1945 marked what they see as the *beginning* of their problems rather than as their liberation. The other surprising, almost counterintuitive, finding was that those who were reunited with their parent(s) after the war echoed those who were orphaned in the refrain I so often heard: "My war began after the war."

The image of the hidden child has been shaped by Anne Frank, whose life ended in a brutal death. Her story continues to be discussed and analyzed, in psychological, spiritual, and sexual terms.⁵ Scores of books have been written about her (Rittner 1998; Enzer and Solotaroff-Enzer 2000; Graver 1995; van Galen Last and Wolfswinkel 1996; van der Rol and Verhoeven 1993, to cite but a few), as well as literary analyses of her writing as a woman and as a resistor (Brenner 1997; de Costa 1998; Ezrahi 1980; and Lagerway 1996), again, to cite but a few. Her story continues to be dramatized—a recent film made for television stars Ben Kingsley as Otto Frank, and another movie about her is currently being made. Her globalized story has endeared her to many a teenage girl, and she is often used as the symbol of and poster girl for the Holocaust. Indeed, as the new millennium neared, Anne Frank was elected “person of the century” by a popular U.S. magazine poll. In the fall of 2004, she was ranked among the top candidates in a Dutch television channel’s attempt to determine history’s greatest Dutch person by popular vote. This touched off a public debate in which members of Parliament pushed to grant her citizenship posthumously, since she died stateless (Nazi Germany had revoked the citizenship of the German Jews) and, because she lacked a residency permit from the Netherlands, had never been Dutch.⁶ Anne Frank’s house is the most visited site in the Netherlands, with approximately one million mostly foreign visitors exploring the house annually since 1998. Like Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Israel where every foreign dignitary is taken, the Anne Frank House has become what Pierre Nora has termed a *lieu de mémoire*, a site of remembrance that is created by an interaction between history and memory (1992: 19). It is one of those Holocaust shrines to which a visit is imperative, if only to acknowledge the Holocaust; even Yasser Arafat felt compelled to visit the Anne Frank House.

Anne Frank may well be the best-recognized icon of the Holocaust. What is less well recognized is that her situation during the war was anomalous. Hiding together as a family was rare for one important reason—it was dangerous. During my three years of seeking hidden children to interview, I encountered only one person who had hidden with his entire family intact and a few more who had spent some or all of their time hiding with one parent. Few Dutch Gentile families would agree to

take in an entire family because hiding adults seemed more difficult and risky. More often than not, children were sent individually to different homes, while parents often would hide together. Hiding separately also ensured that even if one family member was betrayed and caught, the others would survive. The relative wealth and foresight of Otto Frank allowed the Frank family to stay together and to do so above Otto's business, again, a highly unusual situation. Unfortunately, this seeming advantage turned out to be fatal for most of the Frank family.⁷

My initial interest in the topic of hidden Jewish children in Holland was kindled in 1992 when I was living in Holland and doing research at the University of Wageningen. A Dutch friend, a fellow Indonesianist, told me about the "Jewish war orphan" situation. The Dutch state had been involved with the question of hidden Jewish children and family reunification after the war. In the Netherlands, a new law about parental guardianship had been proposed by members of the Resistance and put into effect right after the war. It stated that if parents did not return to claim their children after a short absence, they would lose their right of guardianship over their children.

Although most Jewish parents who returned to claim their children after the war got them back directly from the foster parents, some did not, especially when the foster parents desired to keep the child (Verhey 2001). Many returning parents had to prove to state authorities that they were "fit parents." They had to present their case to a state committee headed by a very conservative Protestant who had religious motives for not returning Jewish children to Jewish families. The special circumstances of the Shoah and the decimation of the Netherlands' Jewish community were not seen by the state as a reason to make these "special cases" or to treat Jewish families with care. A few parents were found by state authorities to be "unfit" and were not allowed to have their children back; they were denied all contact and knowledge of their children's whereabouts. While in some cases family reunifications took place decades later, many are still searching, either for their parent(s) or for child(ren) (Verhey 1991 and 2001).

This committee was most influential in the cases of Jewish children whose parents did not survive the war. The relatives trying to claim

these Jewish children had to go through this committee, and the courts as well, as they sought guardianship. In some instances, the children were returned to Jewish kin, and in others, they were kept by their Christian foster parents. In a few well-known cases, the children were kidnapped, some by their foster families, some by their Jewish families (Fishman 1978a). In no other European country was the state so involved in Jewish family reunification after the war, and nowhere else was it made so difficult for Jewish parents and kin to reclaim their children. Intrigued by this history, which countered every image I had held of Holland and its Jews during World War II, I slowly turned it into a research project.

Although initially I intended to investigate only the “Jewish war orphans,” two compelling reasons changed and broadened my focus. First, once I was in the Netherlands, it became clear that I would be limiting my study to a small number of people. Second, my discussions with Jewish community leaders, academics, and some former hidden children convinced me that nonorphaned hidden children also had important war and family histories. Therefore, in order to analyze differences in the postwar reconstructions of family life, I expanded my focus to include all postwar family configurations among hidden children. I have divided them into three general categories: (1) those who had both parents return after the war, (2) those who had one parent return, and (3) those who were orphaned. The last category includes some hidden children whose cases were brought to the state committee and fought over in the Dutch courts after the war.

For those who were not orphaned, family life rarely returned to “normal” after the war. If biological parents returned, they were often strangers to their own children, and most children never reconnected emotionally with their parents. Some children, such as Max, viewed their foster parents as their true parents, having experienced a nicer family life with them. Some children were confronted with the loss of a beloved parent and sometimes with a new stepparent, which usually intensified feelings of dislocation, of not belonging, and of being unwanted. In other words, although surviving the war was a tremendous feat in itself, creating and re-creating a family in a post-Shoah context often incurred extraordinary emotional costs.

This book, then, will peer beyond the story of Anne Frank's truncated existence and illuminate the history and memory of the hiding experience for Jewish children in the Netherlands. I will put this experience into context by examining former hidden children's memories of the dynamics in hiding families and in their prewar families, if they remember. Just as important, if not more so, I will analyze the process of family reconstruction *after* the Shoah among those who were hidden. The experiences of hidden children represent a very particular war history, vastly different from what we usually read about survivors in the Holocaust literature. Through a focus on these differences and their ramifications on postwar family dynamics, this book unearths and articulates what has been, until now, a relatively hidden history and memory.

In late September 2005 the Dutch railway system formally apologized for its role in transporting, without any resistance from employees, over one hundred thousand Jews, about 75 percent of Holland's Jewish population, from Holland to a transit camp, from which they were deported to concentration camps. This apology is important since it demonstrates that the Netherlands is attempting to get beyond its dominant feelings of being victimized by the Germans while facing its collaboration during the war. That it took over sixty years suggests how difficult this process has been and perhaps how resistant many are to confronting the past. It also illustrates that the Nazi Occupation and the war are still very much alive for its survivors and for the state. This book revisits that past and focuses on the less well-known aspects of Holland and its relationship to the Jews.